

Leadership and Library Media

A Grass-Roots Approach

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Leadership is at a premium in every school in this country. However, our potential leaders are sometimes overlooked. This article presents a trend that connects the leadership of the school library media specialist (SLMS) to curriculum and instruction using two focus areas: (1) describing case studies; and (2) identifying a leadership model that suggests a course of action for the future. Research indicates that leadership is centered on instructional improvement, school climate, collaboration, and a functioning, site-based committee that includes strong community participation.¹ An effective library SLMS who collaborates with staff, technology integrators, curriculum coordinators, and administrators provides unparalleled leadership to school districts seeking the benefits of comprehensive school improvement.

Leadership opportunities in school administration abound for motivated and accomplished SLMSs. The library media center is a solid training ground for school leadership because SLMSs often see the big picture in school administration, understand the complexities of school district operation, and develop strong skills in personnel interactions. The experiences gained in operating a library media program have direct transference to school principalship. This leadership role is clearly stated in AASL's *Information Power*:

The library media specialist assumes a leadership role in gaining the administrative and financial support the program requires. Through collaborating with teachers and others to integrate the

information literacy standards for student learning into the curriculum, the library media specialist establishes the program's central role in student learning and demonstrates the need for adequate support for the program's emphasis in teaching and learning in the acquisition and use of information technology. The library media specialist establishes and fosters relationships that lead to an understanding of the program and support of its goals.²

The same elements that contribute to successful leadership of the school library media program transfer to the school principalship. The basic principals of fiscal responsibility, collaboration with educational partners, and developing relationships to support the teaching and learning process are key components to successful program operation. Haycock summed it up by stating that providing quality learning experiences are tantamount to effective schools for students and teacher.³

Leadership is at a premium in every school in this country. How do we build programs that support expanding leadership with SLMSs? The following case study with two practicing school principals and commentaries from SLMSs reflect the connection between library media and school administrative leadership.

Case Study: Library Media Leadership

Two principals, representing both elementary and secondary levels, discuss how they

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recognize the leadership potential of the SLMS position itself and how it can be a catalyst for movement into school administration. They understand the importance of having a certificated library media teacher in every school, and the impact this has on instructional congruency and school programming. They also understand the leadership potential of the SLMS to surface as a school administrator. In a recent interview these principals responded to two questions.

What skills did you gain as a practicing SLMS that helps you function effectively as a school principal?

Mark Daines, principal at Park Elementary School in Richmond, Utah, responded:

Some key skills that I developed in my tenure as a school library media specialist include: ability to understand and appreciate diversity and differing needs of adults and children; system-wide understanding of curriculum and what is needed to make it function; budgeting and tracking of spending as it relates to school goals; ability to understand and communicate with teachers and school personnel; ability to prioritize the important functions associated with learning from the many demands that one encounters; better understanding of the process of reading and the many resources available to promote and help children improve; and positive ways to handle discipline and deal with behavior problems.

As long as I was associated with the library media center, I was considered the school guru on technology, and I was—thus the job placed me in an enviable position of being ready to face the technology challenge of administration. I enjoyed the work and thus have been able to maintain a very positive and optimistic view that we're capable of doing anything we set our minds to accomplish.

Alison Dunn, former principal at Logan (Utah) High School responded:

Working as a school library media specialist gave me a "whole school commu-

nity" view that I have felt is essential to my job as a principal. I had to work with the entire faculty as a library media specialist and it gave me a very good picture of the daily push and shove and prioritizing that goes into administration. In addition, it gave me a "whole curriculum" view of what was happening in the school and a chance to see the Utah core curriculum standards and objectives jigsaw together. That gave me a chance, too, to study the Utah core curriculum and discuss scope and sequence issues. I also got to work hand in hand with an administrator in making some whole school community decisions as to technology directions. Lastly, I learned to manage budgets and become familiar with fiscal processes.⁴

Why do SLMSS have the potential to be successful school leaders?

Mark Daines responded:

School library media specialists understand the system, how it functions, and they have a feel for the staff and the things that excite and motivate teachers. They understand the scope and sequence of school wide curriculum. They spend considerable time trying to coordinate the school and its many programs. They spend time with their school administrator planning and coordinating resources and working on the school improvement plan. Serving as a library media specialist was a perfect training ground for what an administrator must do to be a successful school leader. I would almost go as far as to say that the daily role of a principal and a library media specialist are almost synonymous.

Alison Dunn responded:

School library media teachers must be "people people" in a very democratic, diplomatic way. They work with parents, children, staff, and support people in managing time, student concerns, parent

concerns, budgets and physical facilities. As a rule, they are the type of educator who has wide-ranging interests and can see the value in all of the curriculum areas. They are not usually too lopsided. I know I was as excited by any material to enhance math instruction as I was by the picture books. School library media specialists can influence the climate in a school by their welcoming attitude and ability to support and help other teachers become successful. That is also very much part of a principal's job.

Feedback from current SLMSS from around the United States showed similar patterns of thought. For a five-year period, questions have been posed through such electronic discussion lists as LM_Net regarding the transition of the SLMS to school principal.⁵ Some interesting comments have resulted, including this comment from an SLMS in California:

I was a principal for four years at a junior high school. I quit and went back to school and became a library media specialist. Wow. What an awakening. What I know now would have helped me tremendously as an administrator. I eventually want to return to administration. I have definitely learned a lot in this position which would make me an even better administrator. Having principal experience helped me to be a leader at my school site. Being a library media specialist is definitely a step to becoming a good administrator.

Many SLMSS believed that their wide range of expertise in leadership experiences paralleled that of the school administrator, including their:

- broad understanding of curriculum;
- grasp of the big picture and tendency to think school mission;
- ability to work with budgets;
- ability to juggle multiple activities;
- service to various clientele, including students, teachers, parents, classified staff;
- planning skills; and

How Successful SLMSs Exercise School Leadership

- Set direction.
- Build a vision for the school library media program that supports school and district direction.
- Get involved with school governance (site-based committee, school community council).
- Become active in local, state, and national education associations.
- Become active in local, state, and national professional associations.
- Demonstrate personal character.
- Create an inviting and optimal library media center environment.
- Work to extend the library media center environment throughout the school.
- Demonstrate personal commitment to professional development through reading, positive work habits, and commitment towards participate and leadership in the development of inservice activities.
- Work collaboratively with students, colleagues, parents, and community.
- Mobilize individual commitment.
- Offer instructional consultation advice.
- Establish a community advisory board.
- Engender organizational capability.
- Engage teachers in the process of integrating the library media core curriculum into their instructional practice.
- Provide evaluation opportunities for students, teachers, and parents.
- Actively seek to engage in opportunities that put you in the forefront of change and organizational improvement.
- Identify opportunities for teachers to gain training that would enhance the quality of their teaching credential.

- understanding of the importance of learning community.

Concluding Remarks

The SLMSs that have made the transition to school administrator identified factors, both

formal and informal, that affected their success. These are:

- The importance of working in a school lead by a principal with vision. The mentorship with the principal was a guiding force in understanding school leadership.
- The experiential base provided by the SLMS position to keep in tune with the integration of resources to support the curriculum and instructional process. Resource management is a key role of the school principal.
- Acquiring people skills through interaction with all members of the school community. Strong people skills are an essential ingredient for a school principal.
- Formal preparation paled compared to informal training from colleagues in school administration. Working in the trenches helped mold skills for school leadership.

One respondent summarized her feelings by indicating that she no longer wanted to walk the path of the school principal, but the path is there and the gate open. Observing, and then helping people interact through the design, development, and implementation of change, can move an educational community forward. Moving to the role of instructional leader of the school, the principal requires an extension beyond the consultative role of the SLMS.

The work of Ulrich, Zenger, and Smallwood is important in helping define routine practices and leadership descriptors for developing a leadership framework.⁶ The sidebar reflects the model applied to the leadership activities of the SLMS. School leadership is at a premium; we can have an impact in our schools. Golarz and Golarz reminds us that the role of the school leader will forever be to assist in creating and nurturing school environments where creative genius is enhanced.⁷ SLMSs have worked hard to unlock the creative genius of our students and teachers. Certainly this was an essential goal of mine!

SLMSs should give serious thought to positions in school administration. Their progressive attitudes, organizational abilities, and interpersonal skills are needed.⁸ SLMSs are in a

unique position to lead the charge toward school- and system-wide instructional improvement. They can lead through their efforts in building a responsive school library media program, taking a key role in improving school climate, and assisting in the development of a strong community of learning. It is important to seize this opportunity to help children improve in academic achievement. ●

References and Notes

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